Treatment for Cardiomyopathy

These general guidelines explain the different types of treatment for cardiomyopathy. Treatment is personalized, so some of these guidelines may not apply to you.

Treatment is directed at the cause of the cardiomyopathy if known. Treatment usually does not restore your heart to complete normal function. A major goal in treatment is to make your heart work more efficiently.

Treatment plan overview
Work closely with your doctor and care team for a better quality of life and less trips to the hospital. Be a partner in your treatment plan by learning how to care for yourself. Tell your doctor when changes occur, keep your appointments and follow your treatment plan.

Activity
Your activity will be limited at first. Talk to your care team about the activities you may do safely.

- If you have a viral infection of the heart, bed rest is needed for a time. Raise the head of your bed to make it easier for you to breathe, change your position often and exercise your legs. Movement and exercise helps circulation by keeping blood from settling in your legs. Exercise your legs by pointing your toes down then pulling back towards your knees. It is like stepping down on a gas pedal then letting up.

- To avoid light-headedness, allow your body time to adjust to a change in position. When getting out of bed, slowly sit up on the edge of the bed and remain there for a few minutes before standing. Avoid activities that require a lot of squatting and then standing.

- You will be given a program that gradually increases your walking distance and includes simple daily exercises.

- To strengthen your heart and muscles, keep active. Learn to increase your activities slowly. You are the best judge of what activities to avoid.

- Your response to the treatment plan and how much your heart improves will determine when you may return to work. You may have to quit work or change your job if it is too strenuous. You may choose to go on temporary disability until you feel better. After you slowly build up your activities, you may be able to return to work part-time or even full-time.

Rest
You will need both physical and emotional rest:

- Limit visitors and schedule times for sleep.

- Take a short nap during the day and sleep at least 8 hours each night.

- Some people may need medicines to help them relax (tranquilizers). However, tranquilizers are not given if you have fluid build up in your liver (congestion).
Effort Symptoms
Both emotional stress and physical strain put extra work on your heart. Situations that increase the work on your heart include:

- Eating a large meal
- Drinking alcohol
- Smoking
- Anxiety
- Cold, hot or humid conditions
- Lifting, pushing or pulling

If your heart cannot meet your body's demand for blood and oxygen, effort symptoms occur. These symptoms include:

- Shortness of breath
- Nausea or vomiting
- Chest pain
- Dizziness
- Profound fatigue or weakness
- Heavy sweating

Immediately stop and rest if you have effort symptoms.

If you have chest pain (angina) during activity and if nitroglycerin tablets are prescribed, place one under your tongue. If your pain does not stop in five minutes, take another tablet. After waiting five minutes, a third tablet may be taken. If this does not stop your chest pain or if the pain increases, call 911. Nitroglycerin helps stop the chest pain (angina) by decreasing the work of the heart muscle and increasing the blood supply to the heart muscle.

Managing Other Symptoms

- Constipation may occur because of less activity and congestion in your abdomen. Straining to have bowel movements puts a lot of work on your heart, so you may be given stool softeners.

- If you have swelling in your feet or legs, raise your legs as much as possible. Swollen tissue develops sores very easily. Put lotion on these areas to keep them from drying. Protect your skin from injury as much as possible. If you have an injury, you will heal slower than normal because of poor circulation.

Diet and Fluid Limitations

Diet is an important part of treatment that you can control to help manage your symptoms.

- Your doctor may order a low salt (sodium), high potassium diet.
- Weight control is important as every extra pound places a strain on your heart.
- In heart failure, your fluid will be limited. Follow the limits set by your care team.
- Avoid caffeine found in coffee, tea and soft drinks as it causes the heart rate to increase. It may also cause an irregular heart rhythm.
- Avoid alcohol as it damages heart muscle cells and causes the heart to function poorly.
- Follow the diet and nutrition information given to you. A dietitian is available to discuss your diet and make suggestions on how to manage your food at home.
**Medicine overview**

There are certain groups of medicines used to treat cardiomyopathy and the symptoms of heart failure. You may not take all types of medicines discussed. Instruction sheets are available for you to learn about those that you are taking.

For each of your medicines, learn the:

- Name
- Dosage (how much you take)
- Time schedule
- Purpose
- Side effects that can occur

A medicine schedule will be created for you. Take your medicines at the prescribed time each day. A strict schedule, usually every 6 to 8 hours, is used for some vasodilator and antiarrhythmic medicines. You may have to set an alarm clock to wake up for these scheduled dosages. Before your schedule is made, tell your care team your normal sleeping schedule, so they can take this into consideration.

- Some medicines are more effective when taken with other prescribed pills and others have fewer side effects when taken with meals. If you forget to take a dose, never double up the next time unless instructed by your doctor. If your symptoms get worse, never take extra doses without your doctor’s advice.
- Carry a card in your wallet that lists all your medicines, doses and scheduled times.
- Call your doctor if you have side effects or increased symptoms. The dose may be too high or too low or the medicine may need to be changed.

- When you are in the hospital, you may get your medicines through an intravenous (IV) line placed in a vein. Intravenous medicines act quickly to decrease your symptoms and increase the heart’s ability to pump. As your condition improves, you may take medicines by mouth, so they last longer in your body.
- In some people, certain medicines may lose their effectiveness. If this happens, the doctor may switch to another drug. Finding the right dose and combination of medicines to improve your health takes time.

**Medicines that Strengthen Heart Muscle Contraction**

Medicines, such as digoxin, increase the strength of the heart muscle contraction. They make your heart pump harder so more blood flows out with each contraction. Dobutamine also increases the strength of contraction and is given intravenously.

**Medicines that Rid Your Body of Extra Fluid**

Diuretics are sometimes also called “water pills”. They cause the kidneys to rid the body of sodium and water. They also remove fluid held in your blood stream, lungs and tissues. The heart’s work then decreases because there is less blood to pump. These medicines may wash out potassium along with sodium in your urine. If this important element is flushed from the body, it is replaced by potassium supplements.
Medicines that Supplement Potassium

Potassium is an essential mineral that helps to regulate your heart’s rhythm. Your heart is very sensitive to potassium levels. If the amount of potassium in your blood is too high or too low, irregular rhythms or poor heart function results. Many water pills cause the kidneys to lose large amounts of potassium. To help replace this loss, you should eat foods high in potassium. Taking a potassium supplement by mouth or IV helps to treat low potassium levels. Symptoms of low potassium include muscle cramps, weakness and fatigue.

Potassium supplements do not taste very good, so take them after meals to prevent stomach upset. You may have to experiment with cold juices that help hide the taste. Some people dilute potassium with orange juice or grape juice.

Medicines that Dilate Blood Vessels

Vasodilators are medicines that open up or dilate your blood vessels. When arteries dilate, the heart does not have to pump blood against much resistance. Therefore, there is less work on the heart muscle. The veins may also open up, which causes less blood to pool in the heart, and thus reduces congestion. As a result of these actions, pressures within the heart chambers become lower.

Certain vasodilators work by opening up both arteries and veins and others work by dilating only one type of vessel. The medicine used for you is based on your specific symptoms. Your doctor may do studies to test several combinations of vasodilator medicines because each person’s body acts differently. Some examples of vasodilators include Hydralazine, Isosorbide, Dinitrate and ACE inhibitors.

Medicines that Regulate Heart Rate and Rhythm

Antiarrhythmics are medicines that regulate abnormal heart rates and rhythms. A regular heart rate and rhythm results in blood being pumped more effectively. These medicines need to be taken on a strict schedule. You must not miss a dose.

Medicines that Prolong Blood Clotting

Limited activity and slow circulation may cause blood clots to form in the heart and blood vessels. Anticoagulants are medicines that keep blood from clotting normally. They prevent harmful blood clots from forming in the blood vessels of your legs, heart and lung. It is important to have your blood clotting time checked by a laboratory test. While you are on this medicine, avoid situations where you could easily get cut or injured. For example, use an electric razor, wear shoes, and do not bruise yourself. If you cut yourself, put pressure over the cut until the bleeding stops. Do not take over the counter medicines without checking with your doctor. Many medicines, including aspirin, interact with anticoagulants. Tell your dentist, pharmacist and other doctors that you are taking this medicine. Always carry identification, such as a medic alert medal or card, stating that you are on an anticoagulant.
Be an active partner in your care

Manage your heart failure by being an active partner in your care. Your heart disease probably developed slowly over months or years. Do not expect it to go back to normal in a few days or weeks. You will have both good and bad days. When you feel good, do not overdo it. You may wear yourself out and feel worse for the next few days.

Treatments explained in this handout are not a cure for cardiomyopathy, but will help you live with the disease. Better treatment methods for this disease are continuously being studied and tested. The time when the first treatment starts is very important. If discovered and treated early, some people with cardiomyopathy have marked improvement.

In summary, follow these tips to improve your health

- Accurately report any changes in how you feel to your doctor or nurse.
- Follow your medicine schedule and report any medicine side effects.
- Stick to your diet and avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Weigh yourself without clothes every day at the same time. Keep a record of your weight and report a gain or loss of five pounds or more in a week.
- Follow your recommended activity schedule.
- Avoid extremes in temperature and humid conditions.
- Avoid emotional situations if possible.
- Avoid contact with people who have the flu or cold. Infections increase the work load on your heart. Your doctor may recommend that you get a flu shot.
- Carry medical information with you. Include information about your medical history, current medicines, allergies and emergency phone numbers.